

Conservation importance of the Albertine Rift and the work of the Albertine Rift Conservation Society (ARCOS)

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La Société de Conservation du Rift Albertin (Albertine Rift Conservation Society, ARCOS) a été créée en 1995 afin de promouvoir la protection de la nature dans les six pays de la région, le Burundi, la République Démocratique du Congo, le Rwanda, la Tanzanie, l'Uganda et la Zambie, par le biais d'un partenariat régional d'Organisations Non-Gouvernementales (ONGs). Les activités présentes et passées de l'association sont présentées, ainsi que ses projets.

Introduction

The Albertine Rift extends for c1,500 km over six countries in eastern and central Africa, including Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, from Lake Albert in the north to Lake Tanganyika in the south. The region is characterised by a rich biodiversity and the high variety of ecosystems found there partially results from the range of altitudes, from 770 m (at Lake Tanganyika) to 5,109 m (in the Ruwenzori Mountains).

Conservation importance

Despite the marked and ever-increasing degradation of biodiversity in the region, the Albertine Rift still possesses an impressive variety of animal and plant species both within and outside protected areas. Furthermore, its forests, lakes and wetlands achieve the highest score in Africa in terms of endemism (see Table 1), and rank among the highest biodiversity hotspots for other taxa such as butterflies, primates and plants. Moreover, Albertine Rift montane forests are ecologically important for their role in local and regional climate regulation, anti-erosion control and watershed protection for the two principal hydrologic basins of Africa (the Nile and Congo basins), as well as providing existential resources for local communities.

Table 1. Albertine Rift overall species numbers and endemism

Class	Species numbers	% Endemism
Mammals	224	14
Birds	712	5
Reptiles	116	26
Amphibians	64	42

ARCOS mission and performances

The Albertine Rift Conservation Society (ARCOS) was established in 1995 as a regional NGO operating in the six Albertine Rift countries mentioned above with a mission to *enhance biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of natural resources of the Albertine Rift region through the promotion of collaborative conservation action, awareness raising and biodiversity information exchange in the region.*

ARCOS's major achievements have been made in the promotion of a regional network consisting of partners, partner organisations (NGOs, government representatives, research institutions, etc) and Focal Points within and outside the rift region. The regional priority-setting workshop *Promoting community-based conservation and regional information exchange in support of Albertine Rift montane forests*, facilitated by ARCOS, was held on 13–15 July 1999 in Kampala (Uganda) and contributed greatly towards consolidating collaboration among local conservation organisations.

Table 2. ARCOS Focal Points in the Albertine Rift countries

Country	Focal point's name	Organisation
1 Burundi	Dr Gaspard Bikwemu	Burundi-Nature
2 DRC	Didier de Faily s.j. (Sud-Kivu) Claude Sikubwabo (Nord-Kivu)	BEST VONA
3 Rwanda	Dr Emmanuel Twarabamenye	ACNR
4 Tanzania	Alice Bukholi	WCST
5 Uganda	Dr Julius Arinaitwe	Nature Uganda
6 Zambia	Mwape Sichilongo	WCST

With funding from various sources, ARCOS has also implemented a number of projects:

- Production of a regional newsletter, which publishes articles from across the region in a bilingual (English and French) format twice a year.

- Visits to national focal organisations in Burundi, DRC, Rwanda, Zambia, Tanzania and Uganda to develop the ARCOS partnership and consolidate the regional network.
- Assessing biological and socio-economic knowledge of Itombwe Forest and its surroundings.
- Production of key materials, fact sheets, a technical report on *Conservation Status of Albertine Rift Montane Forests: Preliminary Review* and other working documents.
- Developing a methodology and guidelines to assess impacts of armed conflicts on Albertine Rift biodiversity conservation.
- Itombwe Forest Project follow-up proposal.
- *Albertine Rift Montane Forest Conservation Status: Challenges and Opportunities* handbook to facilitate decision-making phase 2. This is a policy-targeted handbook and CD-ROM to guide decision-making for the conservation and sustainable use of Albertine Rift montane forests.
- Albertine Rift Regional Expert workshop on species data and information sharing.
- ARCOS Second Biannual Forum.
- Case studies on integrated conservation and development in the Albertine Rift region.
- Framework for biodiversity conservation planning and monitoring of Albertine Rift montane forests.

Future activities

The framework of actions for ARCOS is described in its document entitled *First Steps*, which also provides a review of its 1995–1998 activities and a three-year work plan for 1999–2002. The various events and project proposals for which funding is still being sought are:

- ARCOS core activities for biodiversity conservation in the Albertine Rift, phase 2.

The way forward

Over the next two years, ARCOS will need to deploy considerable efforts on some of these issues, but of paramount importance are the development of a Regional Biodiversity Information Centre, further projects, and fund-raising strategy and techniques. 📄

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